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# “HOW TO FEEL SAFE”: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDY MIGRATION

Itamar Shachar\*

## I. IMAGINING AN ‘INTERNATIONAL STUDENT’

A thick envelop was waiting in the mailbox of my apartment in Tel Aviv when I came back from a tiring day at the NGO office in which I used to work. The *Universiteit van Amsterdam* (UvA) logo on the brown paper resembled a refreshing breeze in the hot Middle Eastern summer. Inside, among other documents which were intended to prepare me for my approaching master studies at the UvA, I found a chromo booklet titled *UvA Start Magazine* (BIS 2009-2010). An updated edition of this booklet is sent every year by the University of Amsterdam to all its newly enrolled international students prior to the beginning of the academic year, when most of them are still in their home countries. The 2009-2010 edition included information on different academic and practical issues, details on various services for the UvA students, and advice regarding how to get by in Amsterdam.

In the colorful pages of the magazine an attractive balance was kept between short pieces of text and accompanying images. Most of these images were photographs of white, seemingly European or North American - or what is usually imagined as European/North American - students, as well as some East Asian-looking

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**Image 1:** “Personal safety” - page 28 of the UvA Start Magazine, 2009-2010

students. These figures were located in different situations, which apparently represent in the eyes of the photographer or the magazine editor some ‘typical’ situations in the everyday life of an ‘international student’: studying in the classroom or at the library, walking next to the university buildings or in other locations in the city, and socializing or partying with fellow students.



#### How to feel safe

There is no need to feel unsafe so long as you take the same precautions as when visiting any big city.

##### ■ Always watch your belongings.

- Never place bags you where you cannot see them. Be especially careful when using public transport and shopping.

- Never leave your belongings unattended. When visiting a cafe, for instance, keep your bag with you rather than leaving it on a coat rack.

##### ■ Be alert and stay aware of your surroundings, especially if you are wearing headphones

- Do not tempt pickpockets by leaving your purse or wallet sticking out of your pocket or in an open bag.

- Do not use cash dispensers in quiet areas at night.

- Bicycle theft is common in Amsterdam. Always lock both wheel and frame properly, preferably to a cycle rack.

- Avoid short cuts through parks, car parks and alleys after dark.

- Never leave your room without locking it, and always be sure to check that your windows are closed.

- Avoid carrying large amounts of cash.

## 2 Personal safety

Although the capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam is a small city with a pleasant atmosphere which will soon make you feel at home. It is also a relatively safe place. Violence crime is rare, but ‘petty’ offences – bicycle theft, pickpocketing and the like – are more common, especially in the city centre, on trains, on trams and near tourist sites.



Viktoriya (American)

*‘Amsterdam is absolutely amazing! The city has such a great vibe and is so beautiful. And it’s one of the safest cities I’ve ever been to.’*

Going over the pages of the magazine, a specific page has drawn my attention (BIS 2009-2010: 28). It was the first and the only page in the whole booklet that had an accompanying image in which the viewer could clearly notice a man that has dark skin color and a woman who wears a headscarf.

These two human figures seem to belong to the crowd of passers-by that fills most of the frame of the photograph. A stall of flowers and a shopping handcart in the corner of the photograph suggest that the crowd is walking in the middle of an outdoor market street, and that also explains why most of the people are looking to one of the street's sides. The crowd at the marketplace, with the noticeable figures of the dark man and the woman who wears the headscarf, serves as a background to a young and white woman, who is looking directly at the camera (and therefore, at the viewer). Her pink jacket, which may raise to the viewer a connotation of innocence, creates an interesting contrast with the dark coat that the other woman is wearing below her colorful headscarf. The centrality of the light female figure and her direct gaze at the viewer lead the reader to understand that she represents an 'average' UvA student (as the alleged viewer her/himself is going to be in the near future), who was caught in the photographer's lens during a visit to one of the city's markets.

Job Cohen, then the mayor of Amsterdam, proudly declared in his greeting remarks for UvA international students which opened the *UvA Start Magazine*, that "[h]ome to people of 170 nationalities, Amsterdam truly is a global city" (BIS 2009-2010: 5). Though more than a few of these 170 nationalities consist of a considerable portion of people of color, or of women who wear a headscarf in public spaces, these people are not visually present in the magazine in order to illustrate Amsterdam's alleged multicultural character. They are also not represented as part of the UvA student community in any of the images, although it is plausible to assume that they constitute at least a certain portion of this community, if we'll take into account the declaration of the Rector Magnificus of the UvA in her own greeting remarks for the magazine: "At the UvA we are proud of our 'international classrooms', where students from all over the world learn together on an equal footing." (Ibid.: 4).

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A Black man and a woman wearing a headscarf are only visually present in a page that carries the title “Personal safety”

A Black man and a woman wearing a headscarf are only visually present in a page that carries the title “Personal Safety”. In the text that is located under the image, the reader may find advice regarding how to avoid incidents such as “pickpocketing”, “bicycle theft” and other kinds of explicitly or implicitly indicated assaults. The proximity of this text and the image associate the figures that appear in it with certain sets of practices, as well as with certain types of spatio-temporal locations - “parks, car parks and alleys after dark”, “public transportation”, “night” (BIS 2009-2010: 28).

The magazine editors, or the photographer, probably didn’t have a deliberate intention to reinforce common stereotypes regarding certain social groups. The text in this specific page even tries to convince us that the people in the picture are actually harmless, because “[t]here is no need to feel unsafe as long as you take the same precautions as when visiting any big city” (BIS 2009-2010: 28). But the location of figures that symbolize what is commonly referred to as ‘migrants’ or ‘ethnic minorities’ on this specific page - and on this page only - reveals the underlying, maybe unconscious, assumptions of the editors regarding the existence of a dichotomy between Amsterdam’s ‘ethnic minorities’ and the prospective ‘international students’. The latter are presumed to share some common socio-cultural characteristics and assumptions with the editors, such as the realization that ‘international students’ are not ‘migrants’, they belong to a different category than the ‘ethnic minorities’ that live in the Netherlands, and they are even presumed to feel somewhat ‘unsafe’ when seeing a dark man or a woman wearing a headscarf. But the page reassures the prospective students that this uneasiness shouldn’t last for long: there is actually no reason to feel that way, as long as the student follows the guidelines of those who were appointed to assist in his/her ‘integration’, and adheres to some of the local behavioral norms.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup>In this point I would like to indicate a few changes that were made

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The construction and reproduction of 'international students' versus 'migrants' or 'ethnic minorities' as two distinctive social categories occurs through a variety of institutional and representational mechanism. The image analyzed above constitutes a particular instance of these processes, which enabled me to combine an anthropological image analysis with autoethnographic writing - a type of writing that I will continue to pursue in the following sections of this text. The autoethnographic vignettes presented in this article are not a substitute for a wider analysis of these construction processes, but are aimed to highlight them and provoke further reflection and discussion.

The reflexive turn in the anthropological discipline during the 1980's has led most anthropologists to incorporate at least some components of autoethnographic reflection in their scholarly work. However, the use in autoethnography as a primary methodology of social research is still criticized with arguments such as insufficient verification of its data and being too self-indulgent, as Holt (2003) and Ellis (1998) have demonstrated in their own autoethnographic accounts. In this text I would refrain from directly engage in this methodological debate, but I would prefer to show that autoethnography can be a useful and important tool in enhancing social research.

The use of autoethnography in this article will enable me to shift the analytical focus from a characterization of pre-made categories used in the area of migration studies, such as 'ethnic minorities' or 'international students', to a tracing of the social relations and mechanisms that (re)produce these categories. Describing some of my personal experiences as a foreign student for social sciences at the UvA will enable me to illustrate that the ways in which legitimized knowledge is being produced are part and parcel of these reproduction processes. In the same time, an autoethnographic reflection on my status as a non-European student within this context will enable me to ponder the fragile character of these categories.

*in the latest edition of the "UvA Start magazine" that was issued for the academic year of 2010-2011: two pictures accompanied by quotes of Black students, South-African in their nationality, have been added; the picture analyzed above has been removed from the section of the magazine dealing with "personal safety", and a picture of a clothing market, mainly crowded with white people, has taken its place; no image of any woman who wear a headscarf appears in the magazine. However, as the image analysis I've suggested here is only an illustration for a wider argument, I think it is still highly relevant, even when taking into account the changes that have*



*been conducted in  
the visual content  
of the magazine's  
newer version.*

## II. 'INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' AND 'MIGRANTS' IN A GLOBAL MOBILITY REGIME

In order to understand the construction of the distinction between 'international students' and other types of 'migrants' or 'ethnic minorities', we should examine the current institutional arrangements which endeavor to control people's movement throughout the world. These current arrangements are usually associated with the concept of 'globalization', which should no longer be understood as a state of affairs which enables a relatively free flow of people, capital, goods, cultural trends and ideas across the globe (e.g. Held et al. 1999). Relating to the growing institutional limitations on the movement of people, Shamir claims that a new "global mobility regime" is emerging (2005: 199). This regime enables free movement for some people, but reinforces old and new mechanisms of limitations on the movement of many others, through "processes of closure, entrapment, and containment" (Ibid.). As the processes of globalization (in the sense that Shamir gives them) are intensified, and movement is becoming a significant condition for acquiring education, work and political influence, one's ability to move freely is becoming a crucial and central aspect of her/his location in the social matrix of power.

The connection between geographical mobility and social location is also reflected in the structure of the academic sphere, which produces legitimized knowledge regarding this state of affairs. An actor in this domain has to move freely around the globe for purposes of studying, teaching, researching, attending conferences, etc., if s/he strives to improve his/her location and increase his/her legitimacy within the field. Therefore, in order to be able to produce legitimized knowledge regarding the options to move and those who move - i.e. to become a scholar of 'migration' and 'migrants' - one has to become part of a specific group within this category, usually named 'expatriates' or 'highly skilled migrants'. Migration scholars regularly distinguish these groups, and therefore themselves as well, from the other 'migrants'. Many of them tend to attribute specific 'ethnicity' to the latter, binding together migrants who have migrated in different periods and hold various legal statuses<sup>ii</sup> - while leaving the characteristics of their

preferential mobile class invisible. That way, the differential ability to move reproduces unequal power relations also in the field of knowledge production: those who are free to move are also free to study and define those whose movement is a subject for inspection and restriction.

<sup>ii</sup> For a critique of this dominant tendency in migration studies see Wimmer (2009).

‘International students’ - people who migrated in order to pursue different types of academic programs, for a period that is formally limited in time but sometimes constitutes the start of a long-term or permanent immigration - appear to be affiliated with the privileged class of the global mobility regime. This affiliation is embedded in the representation of ‘international students’ through representational sites such as the *UvA Start Magazine*, which clearly distinguishes them from the class which is subject under the current globalization processes to limitations and blocking of its movement, marked by a dark-skinned man and a woman who wears a headscarf. This marking of the ‘other’ as carrying a potential danger, which can be restrained and handled by the dominant group, is one mechanism through which the preferential class is consolidated. The ‘international students’ are assumed to be part of this emerging class, which share certain commonalities of culture and consciousness.

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Another mechanism through which the ‘international students’ become part of the preferential mobile class is an institutional one. In the case of the UvA, the university administration is generously trying to save its students the need to handle by themselves the demands of the Dutch government Immigration and Naturalisation Service - IND (Dutch initials for *Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst*). The *UvA Start Magazine* kindly invite the prospective students to receive detailed instructions on visa issues at the University website (BIS 2009-2010: 17-18), which in turn suggests the students the comfortable option of applying for a residency permit in the Netherlands through the university’s service and information centre (University of Amsterdam, n.d.). Applying for a residency permit in this track saves the students the hardships



that ‘other’ migrants become familiar with, and even the experience of being physically present at the IND offices together with less fortunate migrants. Instead, it enables the students to carry out this procedure in a familiar university setting vis-à-vis friendly university employees.

This mechanism is expected to be further regulated and expanded when the *Modern Migratiebeleid* (modern migration policy) that was approved by the Dutch parliament will be implemented, enhancing the special status of higher education institutions (as well as of private companies and other organizations) as an intermediaries between their students and the IND. While this policy is expected to “make the Netherlands more welcoming for specific groups such as highly-skilled migrants and students” (Nuffic 2010), by facilitating “simplification” and “acceleration” of the immigration procedures, it is also expected to have “a restrictive effect on others”: immigrants who are not expected to “contribute to a strengthening of the Dutch economy” (Immigration and Naturalisation Service 2010). The affiliation of ‘international students’ with the group of ‘highly skilled migrants’, and the distinction of this category from the ‘other’ immigrants, is now receiving a more official backing, based on the already existing status of the higher education institutions as an actor in the institutional regulation of immigration to the Netherlands. Although this mechanism does not promise the student safe membership in the preferential mobile stratum of the global mobility regime, it certainly saves her the need to identify herself with the lower, restrained stratum.

This institutional mechanism gains some of its legitimacy through corresponding with the ways in which this distinction is imagined and represented by members of the university community, not only through the ways in which the university welcomes its foreign students but also through the structure of the field of knowledge production. It isn’t coincidental that “[t]he standard academic literature on migration pays virtually no attention to students as migrants: an ironic situation given that most migration scholars encounter students on a daily basis” (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003: 230). As already indicated by Foucault (1980: 52), power is both embedded in the process of knowledge production

itself and in the forms of action that the produced knowledge enables to those who hold it: “the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power.” Based on that notion, he specifically claimed that “the great nineteenth-century effort in discipline and normalization” constituted “the conditions of the emergence of the human sciences” (Ibid.: 61). Said (2003: 3) adopted Foucault’s ideas in his account of the Western knowledge on the Orient: he viewed it as a discourse which generate and exercise power, which is enabled to “manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically [...] and imaginatively.” In the following section, I will try to illustrate how power is embedded in an academic context which involves international students. This autoethnographic vignette will be focused on one of the stages in the socialization of international students to the role of knowledge producers. It will demonstrate how this process consolidates our identity, adequate practices and desirable trajectories as students of migration - while distinguishing ourselves from the ‘other’ migrants, who become the subject of our research and experimentation.

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This process consolidates our identity as students of migration - while distinguishing ourselves from the ‘other’ migrants

### III. THE TRAINING CURRICULUM OF PROSPECTIVE MIGRATION SCHOLARS

“Immigration and Islam in Western Europe - Field Trip to the Al-Kabir Mosque in East Amsterdam” - this title described the 10th session in the outline of the course “Dynamics of International Migration and Integration”, which I was taking during the first semester of my studies at the UvA. As a new resident in the Netherlands and as a social sciences student, I was curious to discover the less noticeable dimensions of my new social environment, and the field trip to the mosque looked to be a great opportunity for that. On November 3rd, I was cycling across Amsterdam’s historical canals towards the south-east, to an area of the city which I had never visited before. Getting closer to my destination, I recognized the mosque mainly according to the familiar faces of my

classmates that were gathering in front of it. Except for a rather large sign above its entrance door, the mosque was immersed in the standard Amsterdam block in which it was located and wasn't clearly identifiable to a stranger.

Entering the main worship hall of the mosque, we took off our shoes and sat down on the room's carpet, while some of the female students put on headscarves. The soft light inside the mosque's hall completed the unusual setting for a university class. A young woman, who was roughly the same age as most of us, stood in the middle of the room, wearing a headscarf herself. After a short presentation she started to answer patiently our mixture of questions, which related to the mosque and its activities, Islamic traditions, the Moroccan community (in Amsterdam specifically and generally in the Netherlands), the status of women and young people in this community, and many other issues. She preferred to speak in Dutch, and to be translated into English by the professor who organized the tour. When she had to leave the mosque and begin her working day, an older Dutch man took her place. He told us about his career shift from the academic world to operating a joint project of the municipality of Amsterdam and members of the Al-Kabir mosque community. The project was intended to prevent the emergence of what he termed as 'radicalization' among Moroccan youth.

When the time of the prayer was approaching, and some of the elderly mosque attendants started to gather in the entrance to the worship hall, we moved to the adjacent room, where tea and biscuits were waiting for us.<sup>iii</sup> Then, we were ready to finish our 'trip' to the 'field', and each of the participants was able to calmly go back, or cycle back, to her/his 'natural' environment.

...

The field trip, it seems, was designed to confront us - the western 'international students' - with the stereotypes that we were assumed to have of 'migrants' or 'Muslims'. The direct encounter with the 'real' people in their 'natural' or 'authentic' environment, which is the founding element of the classical anthropological

<sup>iii</sup> *Many of us were unaware of the political implications that drinking tea in one of Amsterdam's mosques can have. This practice was appraised by the former mayor of Amsterdam,*

methodology of fieldwork, was supposed to assist us in overcoming any prejudices we might have, so that we could become 'good', 'unbiased', scholars of 'migration'.

It seems that Guénif-Souilamas (2006: 30-31) notions regarding the "ideal types" that are dominating French discourse regarding its "postcolonial population" are useful for understanding the design of our field trip. We encountered, directly and indirectly, the two ideal figures of 'migrants' that are the most "threatening, because they are not 'integrated'; they belong to another world - the Arab and/or Muslim world" (Ibid.: 31). These two figures are "the veiled French Muslim young woman, whose veil designates her as the archetype of the alienated woman, unable to liberate herself from an oppressive patriarchal Muslim order" (Ibid.), and "le garçon arabe", or the Arab boy", that "may slip from delinquency to terrorism and thus threatens national integrity and security" (Ibid.: 24-25). The first encounter with the young Muslim woman in the mosque was supposed to teach us that wearing a headscarf doesn't equate with submissiveness or passivity: the women we talked to was an independent and active member of the mosque community, and perceived herself at the same time as part of Dutch society (she indicated how amused she was by white Dutch ladies who spoke to her in slow and simple Dutch because they assumed she doesn't speak the language well). The second encounter with the Dutch scholar/community-worker was intended to assure us that what he termed as 'radicalization' does not constitute a prevailing 'problem' among young Muslims in Amsterdam, and if to some extent it becomes a 'problem' then it can be 'solved' quite simply. We have been taught that there the potential threat of young Muslim men can be handled and restrained by a good-intentioned composition of academic knowledge and welfare treatment.

The oscillation of the project's entrepreneur between the worlds of academia, municipal agencies and community/religiously-based organizations in order to design and exercise an 'anti-radicalization' project illustrates two important arguments raised by Essed and Nimako (2006). The first is the existence of what they term as "the Dutch minority research industry" (Ibid.: 284): an academic-based realm that has institutionally emerged

*Job Cohen, as a way to relieve inter-communal tensions in the city. Later on, during the campaign for June 2010 parliamentary elections, the leader of the populist Partij Voor de Vrijheid (The Freedom Party) was denouncing Cohen's candidacy for the prime minister's office by calling him "tea-drinking, multiculti-coddling Cohen" (Shorto 2010). Without determining the political importance of tea drinking, it seems worthwhile to ponder on the place that this practice occupies in the Western imagination of Oriental hospitality. However, developing a satisfactory discussion on this issue will be beyond the scope of this text.*

and relied upon state-defined policy needs, while individuals are constantly moving between the spheres of the state, the academy and the public discourse.

The other claim of Essed and Nimako which is highly relevant for understanding the ‘anti-radicalization’ project is that “the problematization of ethnic minorities” is one of the main characterizations of the ‘Dutch minority research industry’: certain practices (and refraining from other practices) engaged by some people affiliated with an ethnic minority group are being identified as characteristic to at least a certain portion of that group, and are being labeled as ‘problems’ which need to be addressed (Essed and Nimako 2006: 297). On the other hand, ‘problems’ do not occur among the invisible white majority, which is rarely a subject of research or of specifically-designed public programs.

Hage (1998) accurately indicates that what should be considered as a ‘problem’ is the mere rhetoric of ‘problems’ and ‘problem solving’ when relating to ‘migrants’ or ‘ethnic minorities’. His book *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* provides a critical account of the Australian White national fantasy. A central component of this fantasy is “the ‘technologies of problematisation’ it puts into place to construct immigration, multiculturalism and migrant settlements into problems ready-made for the White national subject to worry about” (Ibid.: 234). The ability to construct ‘problems’ and to suggest ‘solutions’ for them, whether these solutions

promotes “exclusion” or “tolerance” regarding non-White Australians (Ibid.: 79), constitutes a dominant position of Whiteness.

Therefore, the ‘field trip’ introduced us to more than “Immigration and Islam in Western Europe”, as the course outline suggested; it introduced us to a dominant way in which “Western Europe”, and specifically influential groups in the Netherlands, understands “Immigration and Islam”. Some might also recognize an implied message within this introduction: in order to become a part of “Western Europe” you should also understand “Immigration and Islam” in these prevailing ways - and overcome

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A ‘problem’ is the  
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this understanding later on in order to become a 'good' migration scholar. As in the case of the image at the "UvA Start Magazine", we were annexed - at least potentially - to the preferential class of the global mobility regime. Those of us who are citizens of Western Countries or the European Union were socialized through these elements to the latent joint consciousness of the privileged section of the world's population; those of us, like me, who are not part of this group by nationality, were introduced to the predispositions they should adhere to in order to become a part of this emerging class.

...

The other dimension in the curriculum that prepared us to become members in this preferential group was not thematic, but methodological: the field trip was also a prologue for a more intense engagement in the classic anthropological methodology of fieldwork, which introduced us to two founding elements of the anthropological tradition. The first element is the construction of the 'field' as a socio-temporal site in which a limited-in-time anthropological research is being conducted. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997), this site is distinct from 'home', the social and physical environment from which the ethnographer arrives to the 'field' and to which s/he is going back. While the social scientist has the privilege of moving freely between the 'home' and the 'field', her subjects of research appeared to remain locked in the latter site. Even though "anthropology appears determined to give up its old ideas of territorially fixed communities and stable, localized cultures" (Ibid.: 4), anthropologists still aspire to find in the 'field' some kind of 'purity'. They are still engaged in an "uncritical mapping of 'difference' onto exotic sites", which contains an "implicit presumption that 'otherness' means difference from an unmarked, white Western 'self'" (Ibid.: 14-15). This notion supports the claim of de L'Estoile (2008) that "colonial legacies" are present in a wide range of contemporary aspects, including "the rhetoric and the categories mobilized when Europeans deal with migrants from other continents" (Ibid.: 267), as well as "the intellectual tools that are available to us [i.e. anthropologists - I.S.] to describe and make sense of that world" (Ibid.: 272).

But meeting the ‘other’ during our ‘trip’ to the ‘field’ is not only a colonial legacy that somehow persisted in our academic discipline: it is a crucial element in constituting our self-identification as affiliated with a privileged social stratum, while taking the role of migration scholars within it. Favell (2007) claims that “by recognizing, classifying, and then reshaping the social interactions that follow from movement as ‘incorporation’ or ‘integration’, the receiving society itself is constituted” (Ibid.: 273). This argument continues the line of thought suggested by Said (2003) regarding the relationship between the West and the Orient: the West needed to have the Orient - and the scholars of Orientalism who have defined the Orient for the West - in order to define itself.<sup>iv</sup> Reflectively examining our field trip, I would therefore suggest that this methodological practice socialized us to the role of migration scholars as agents who assist Western societies to constitute and distinguish themselves.

<sup>iv</sup> A competent phrasing of this point by Said can be found in his 1995 afterward for “Orientalism” (2003: 329-354).

The second traditional anthropological element embedded in the field trip was the construction of the anthropologist as an intellectual holding a presumed universal, cosmopolitan and humanistic perspective. As described above, our ‘direct’ encounter with the ‘other’, as well as our meeting with the good-intentioned migration scholar/community worker, were supposed to render us with the humanistic perspective that migration scholars ought to have. According to James Clifford, this constructed image of the contemporary anthropologist has become “a familiar modern *topos*,” which also affected the way in which Edward Said has perceived his own work (1988.: 263; emphasis in original - I.S.). In the post-colonial setting, in which the anthropologist aspires to emancipate her discipline from its historical links with the colonial regimes, the idealized image of the autonomous ethnographer promotes her portrayal as an unbiased, good-intentioned, person, who is emancipated from the power relations which prevail in the rest of the human society.

These two key elements in the implicit curriculum of the social science student at the UvA serve as a complementary step in the process that began in the gaze of the prospective student at the image who teach him/her “how to feel safe”: the ‘international student’ is not only distinguishable from the ‘other’ migrants, but



her role is to join those who study these 'others'. Also after the reflexive turn in the human sciences, there is still a space for anthropologists to ponder whether "we still think of fieldwork in the archetype of the white-faced ethnographer in a sea of black or brown faces" (D'Amico-Samuels, quoted in Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 35). This archetype is not only echoing the image at the *UvA Start Magazine*, but is also present in the way 'otherness' is constructed through the practice of the field trip. The 'field' is not only a site to which the student is being sent to study, but it is also a concept that constructs the student's identity, making clear to where and to whom she belongs, and to where and to whom she doesn't.

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'Otherness' is constructed through the practice of the field trip

A successful trajectory of an international student therefore begins with acknowledging her distinction from the 'other' migrants, and continues with the adequate completion of her academic training. In the case of a social science student, and especially a student in the migration program, this training will hopefully lead her in the future to occupy a position in a research institution, or governmental or non-governmental agencies, that are part of the 'minority research industry' - the field through which the West understands and handles its internal 'others'. Through keeping the necessary distinctions and adhering to the right training, there are growing chances that the student would be able to realize the opportunity offered by the Western university to its 'international students': to become a part of the class that is able to exercise the right to freedom of movement, while studying those who were deprived from this preferential position.

#### IV. IN FRONT OF THE DETENTION CENTER

Wired fences and a canal surround the detention center in Zaandam, a town adjacent to Amsterdam. From one side of that facility, which is not officially called 'a prison', the group of demonstrators that chanted "No man is illegal" and the detainees could see each other through the fence. The demonstration was mainly organized by Dutch activists, but some of the participants

<sup>v</sup> *The 'Kristallnacht' (night of broken glass) was a series of pogroms against the Jewish population of Germany, initiated by the Nazi party on the 9th of November 1938. Many refer to it as a key event in the historical developments that led to the holocaust. The European network UNITED has declared the date as the international day against fascism and anti-Semitism, and encourages groups and activists to hold on this day different types of anti-racist and anti-fascist actions. See, for example, the network's report on the activities in 2009 (UNITED 2009).*

<sup>vi</sup> *Bourdieu also discussed this*

were from other countries, mainly within the EU. The protest event was intentionally held on the 7th of November, towards the upcoming annual commemoration of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom.<sup>v</sup> Coincidentally, it was held only four days after the field trip I described above, but the desire that the trip had raised in me to explore the issue of migration outside the university setting was probably what finally convinced me to join the demonstration.

Though the protest event did not include a face-to-face encounter between the demonstrators and the detainees, the indirect encounter through the wired fences remained a significant interaction. While the comfortable setting of the direct encounter during the field trip helped to facilitate the trajectories in which each one of the participants was embedded beforehand, the distant and fragmented encounter that the protest event enabled has actually stimulated certain changes in the practices and perceptions of the participants. In the first place, the event itself was generated due to the presence of the detainees in the detention facility; the unusual interaction with other people during the event stimulated excitement among the detainees, and this excitement turned into a certain resistance towards the staff of the detention center when they tried to put the detainees back into their cells; this strong response of the detainees caused the activists to initiate in the future more events in front of the center, hoping that they would help to encourage as much as possible the people who are being captured within the fences.

In his analysis of the gratuitous act, Bourdieu (2000) has indicated that this kind of act "creates obligation" - a symbolic debt - which may be reciprocated by a "countergift or gratitude", but when it accumulates "it sets up a legitimate domination" (Ibid.: 198).<sup>vi</sup> Though most political actions initiated by relatively privileged groups for the benefit of the less privileged may be analyzed as encompassing unequal symbolic exchange, I believe that something different was happening in this specific protest event. The almost anonymous character of the interaction between the activists and the detainees prevented the creation of a significant symbolic debt of one side to the other, while it could still stimulate changes on both sides. When the encounter is 'direct' and each side look in

the eyes of the other, even the most well-intentioned activist will probably find herself entrenched in an unequal symbolic exchange.

*issue, in a more elaborated way but with different emphasis, in his book "The Logic of Practice" (1990).*

My position as a participant in that protest event was different from that of most of the other activists. Holding a temporary residency permit in the Netherlands, I was quite afraid of the possibility of being detained if the police would decide to take protesters into custody. Although I promised myself that I would try to refrain from any possible trouble, I was still somewhat afraid that I might be detained, and then I would face the risk of being deported from the Netherlands, or even the EU. The boundary that distinguished me from the detainees was thinner than that of many of the other protesters: I could easily transgress the 'safe' category of an 'international student' and have much more in common with the detainees on the other side of the canal and the wired fence. Being an 'international student' has ceased to be a clear category that distinguished me from the 'other' migrants, and though it still secured my preferential and protected status, its fragile character was revealed.

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The field trip, on the other hand, suggested a safe maintenance of the distinctions and the power relations between all the people involved: transgression of categories didn't seem possible, and each participant has maintained the expected set of practices that is associated with her categorical location. This, even though the field trip has offered what seems to be in the anthropological imagination an unmediated encounter with the 'real' people in 'their own' environment, while the protest event only suggested a series of indirect, remote and fragmented interactions.

...

Participation in a singular protest event can rarely constitute in itself an alternative methodological project. However, I hope that through the autoethnographic descriptions of the demonstration and the field trip I was able to depict how powerful is the safety that the traditional academic work guarantees to its pursuers. This safety

encompasses the definition of the roles of those involved in the research process, and the authorization of the practices through which this process may be conducted (such as the traditional 'fieldwork').

My autoethnographic account was aimed to propose a way to dissent from these safe positions. It aimed to show their strength but also their fragile moments, and to trace the social mechanisms

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through which they are (re)produced. This move was derived from my conviction that as social scientists we should refrain from perceiving our intellectual capacities as granting us an epistemological position that transcends the social matrix of power. Acknowledging through our analyses the institutional and epistemological privileges that the academic analytical process grants us will also enable us to expose the precarious characteristics of this position, and through that to locate ourselves in the same social context that is regularly being used by us to explain 'others'.

Placing ourselves as another subject of the research process will challenge the construction of the social scientist as an authorized producer of knowledge, which is reinforced through some elements of the anthropological tradition that I have depicted in this article. It will challenge our tendency to stabilize and manage our subjects of research during the analytical process. In that way we could hopefully prevent the academic fields which are growingly pursuing the study of 'migration' from sinking into the pitfalls that Oriental studies were so immersed in, as the work of Edward Said has taught us. Furthermore, it is likely to assist us in shifting the knowledge that we produce to new and vivid directions, and in suggesting alternatives to the rising caste boundaries in the world that we live in.

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